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## Same old story: between disability and disinterest

by SASHA SCAMBLER Nov 15, 2016



Image: 'the littlest hobo' from Alice's Flickr Photostream

This week the [UN Committee on the Rights of Disabled Persons](#) (CRPD) published the results of an investigation that found that UK reforms to welfare have led to “grave and systematic violations” of disability rights. In the same week a range of other stories have made the headlines in the UK media:

Two disabled families won their cases in the [Supreme Court](#) against housing benefit cuts in the form of the ‘Bedroom Tax’.

A man who [publically ridiculed a disabled reporter](#) became the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America.

[Two brothers](#) (aged 12 and 8) were refused entry onto seven buses because they were both wheelchair users and took up too much space on the bus.

Media coverage of the preparations get into full swing for the [BBC Children in Need campaign](#) 2016, hence the teddy bear image that accompanies this post, (see also previous [blog post](#) on this topic in relation to the portrayal of disabled children).

Across these stories, mixed messages abound, as rights legislation clashes with habitualised perceptions of disabled people as poor and in need of charity, or ill and in need of care. And doubtless many are poor, and in need of financial help, and some are ill or have health problems. But the subtext matters. And much of the poverty, unemployment and isolation experienced is directly linked to the ideologically driven cuts to welfare and support for disabled people both in and out of work, as explored by [Jen Remnant](#) in her post in April, and [Peter Beresford](#) more recently. I want to argue that much of this generalised discrimination can be linked back to the unconscious reflection of a medicalised idea of disabled people as deficient and in need of normalising, or in need of pity and charity if normalising is not possible.

Take the two recent court cases as examples. Disability campaigners have protested against the “bedroom tax” since its introduction in 2013. They argued that spare rooms are a necessity rather than a luxury for many disabled people and that removing subsidies for social housing for people who were deemed to have a ‘spare’ room was discriminatory and would leave disabled people in poverty and in danger of losing their homes. The Supreme Court upheld the appeal stating that “[some people with disabilities have a transparent medical need for an additional bedroom](#)”. The report from the court [stated](#) that: “Mrs Carmichael, is an adult who cannot share a room with her husband due to her disabilities. The Rutherfords require a regular overnight carer for their grandson with severe disabilities. ... The decisions in relation to Mrs Carmichael and the Rutherfords were therefore manifestly without reason [46-49].”

This comes hot on the tails of the publication of the findings of the [CRPD inquiry](#) which was set up to examine the cumulative effects of government legislation and policies on social security, work and employment from 2010 when the Conservative/Liberal coalition took power. The inquiry focused on any changes which might impact disproportionately on “[enjoyment by persons with disabilities of their rights to live independently and to be included in the community \(art. 19 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities\), to an adequate standard of living and social protection \(art. 28\) and to work and employment \(art. 27\).](#)” The narrowing of the social care criteria, closure of the Independent Living Fund, changes to housing benefit and criteria utilised for parts of the Personal Independence Payment were all found to negatively affect the rights of disabled people. In addition, the [inquiry found](#) that the number of disabled Employment and Support Allowance claimants receiving sanctions had increased; that the spare room subsidy (bedroom tax) did not recognise the specific needs of some disabled social housing tenants; and that there was a lack of recognition of the support needs of disabled people in work. It was also noted that disabled people were being negatively portrayed as “[dependent or making a living out of benefits, committing fraud as benefit claimants, being lazy or putting a burden on taxpayers](#)”

The recent court cases suggest that there is a recognition that many barriers faced by disabled people are political in nature, due to oppression, discrimination and cost-cutting rather than their impairment per se. But the social barriers, negative attitudes and generalised discrimination that disabled people encounter on a daily basis remains hidden. The continued cynical portrayal of disabled people as lazy scroungers in the media feeds into the view of disabled people as ‘other’ to be vilified if deemed lazy or pitied if deemed a tragic victim.

The way we act is shaped, according to [Bourdieu \(1990\)](#) at least in part, by the experiences, views, social environment and position that we grow up within. This, provides us with a set of ways of thinking and doing which make it likely that we will act in certain ways. These ways of thinking and doing ‘generate

practices, perceptions and attitudes' through habituation come to be things done without thinking, and so appear self-evident rather than chosen. This predisposes members of a society to interact in ways consistent with the social norms of their group. Therefore if we have grown up in a society in which the medical model/personal tragedy model of disability is the main way of thinking about disability and acting towards people with disabilities then we grow up with the assumption that the reason that disabled people find themselves in poverty, or unable to work is because of their impairment, because there is something wrong with them. And therefore either they are not working hard enough to overcome their problem, or they cannot overcome their problems and need charity. Their difference makes them the object of pity, ridicule or derision.

It is against this background that the ridicule and abuse of disabled people has become so normalised that millions of American people were happy to vote for a presidential candidate who felt able to mock and mimic a disabled reporter working for one of the country's leading newspapers, at a rally in front of thousands of people. Whilst the UK is forced to face up to the institutionalised disableism enshrined in government policies around welfare and employment support, the US must consider the messages their choice of President sends to disabled people across the country and beyond about equality, rights, dignity and shared humanity.